

# Editorial

## Personal tutoring and academic advising: improving student success

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In April 2009 Edge Hill University hosted in Liverpool the Third International Personal Tutoring and Academic Advising Conference, focusing on improving student success. The conference was attended by about 150 delegates from all over the world, including Europe, the Middle East, Africa, North America and Australia. This demonstrates that improving student success is a key priority for higher education institutions throughout the world. In this special edition of *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning* we are publishing a selection of peer-reviewed papers that were presented at the conference.

Higher education globally today is undergoing significant changes. Not only has the recent global economic downturn dramatically affected the funding and resources available across all segments of higher education, but also there continues to be an increasingly diverse number of students enrolling in higher education. This diversity, which includes a variety of student backgrounds, needs, skills and expectation, is impacting on our institutions in ways never experienced before. From the widening participation initiative in the UK to the inclusion of liberal arts degree options in Japan and the dramatically growing enrollment in the community colleges in the US, institutions across the world are increasing student numbers and diversity. They are also facing new challenges in student success, retention and persistence to graduate, and/or the attainment of students' educational, career and life goals.

Research continues to demonstrate the integral role that academic advising and personal tutoring (Thomas and Hixenbaugh, 2006) plays in the success of our students, especially for students with fewer familial resources to draw on to support their successful transition into and through higher education. Connecting students to the institution and their learning experience is key to their success. For example, Vincent Tinto (2006-2007: 4) notes that: 'Involvement, or what is increasingly being referred to as engagement, matters and it matters most during the critical first year of college'. Furthermore, Kuh et al. (2005: 8) affirm that 'what students do during college counts more for what they learn and whether they will persist in college than who they are or even where they go to college'.

Academic advisors, academic faculty staff and personal tutors are often the 'linking pin', facilitating and brokering students' connections to the wider higher education community and equipping them with the information and skills they need to engage. Whether we use the term 'academic advisor' or 'personal tutor', the role is the same: teaching students the skills they need to make effective decisions about their educational choices and plans, assisting them in connecting with the variety of resources and services on the campus, ensuring that they have the skills needed to be successful students, and serving as an academic mentor for them as they enter, move through and exit our institutions. Therefore, the role that academic advising and personal tutors play in the success of our students and the success of our institutions must be recognised and valued by all in the higher education arena.

There are, however, challenges to academic advising and personal tutoring, which can be perceived as an expensive activity, especially in the current context of fixed or reduced funding for higher education institutions. Even before the 'financial crisis' we witnessed institutions in the UK dispensing with

personal tutoring, primarily for cost reasons and perhaps due to a belief that it was an outmoded form of learning and support (Grant, 2006). There has, however, been a realisation of the value of personal, one-to-one or small group contact between institutional staff and students, and that this is often best organised through a model of personal tutoring or academic advising. For example, Simpson (2006) provides a compelling financial case for the reintroduction of personal tutoring at the Open University. His work suggested that the average cost of additional contact with students was £200 and that this resulted in increasing retention rates by 5 per cent, with a saving of £1300 per student, which represented a 550 per cent return on investment. In the same publication (Thomas and Hixenbaugh, 2006) there are researched examples from a number of institutions about new models of tutoring and advising that meet the needs of a larger and increasingly diverse student body, and connect students more effectively with the institution, its staff and other students in ways that are not prohibitively expensive.

At the conference a panel discussion on the future of personal tutoring and academic advising that involved colleagues from Australia, the US and the UK acknowledged the global economic challenge, the impact it is currently having in higher education institutions internationally, and how this is influencing future models of personal tutoring and academic advising. The panel discussion also identified and discussed the need for sector wide bodies, such as the National Academic Advising Association (NACADA) in the US and the Higher Education Academy in the UK, institutions and staff working in the area to move in a number of important directions, namely:

1. Strategic (re)positioning of personal tutoring and academic advising, for sustainability;
2. Creating influence through evaluation and evidence bases;
3. Valuing innovative approaches and practices that are sensitive to different institutional, discipline and programme contexts.

Part of the rationale for strategic positioning, or repositioning, of personal tutoring and academic advising is an acknowledgement that these services can be at risk of being rationalised and reduced. (This is particularly true for 'centralised' student support models, but which can be of great value to some students, especially when linked to departmental strategies – see, for example, Grant (2006) and Gibson and Luxton in this edition). Strategic positioning is concerned with aligning tutoring, advising and student support with institutional strategic priorities, identifying and engaging in political/power networks at the departmental and institutional levels, and communicating using language that the political/power networks adopt (see Wall and Preston (2009) and Blythman et al. (2006)). It is also important, in this strategic-influencing process, to create an evaluation and evidence base of the impact of tutoring and advising on student success. Institutional decision makers work in a context of 'supercomplexity' (Lea and Callaghan, 2008), with multiple agendas and multiple 'performance indicators', so evidence about effectiveness can influence the process and can be an important aid to their decision making.

Although in a situation of risk, uncertainty and perhaps reduction, innovative approaches and practices will evolve. Technology, and particularly the web, is appearing as a likely candidate. Gipson's (2009) critique of a '24 hour Wal-Mart advising' notion is interesting. It allows a high level of convenience for the student, appropriate for work based learners, but is it sustainable? Does it address ongoing challenges for supporting some student groups that need to build rapport and trust? Furthermore, does it feed the ongoing tensions between 'student as consumer/customer' and 'student as autonomous learner'? Nonetheless, this technology will feed into wider developments in practice, and will add to the diversity of approaches in personal tutoring and academic advising.

This increasing diversity in practice is partly a reaction, or proaction, to different contexts and possibilities within these contexts. Therefore, rather than 'importing' generic approaches, the role of the evaluation and evidence base, already mentioned, is particularly important for establishing, rigorously,

whether approaches and systems are working, and in creating specific developmental directions and priorities. This goes beyond checking whether students are 'enjoying' particular engagements, or low level reaction-based evaluation, towards impact on student success, e.g. progression, grades, feedback, etc., or higher level impact-based evaluation (Kirkpatrick and Kirkpatrick, 2006). This area of work is growing, certainly with the work of the Higher Education Academy and NACADA, and their International Conference where evaluated examples of innovative work are shared and new theories and models are explored. This work is also wide-ranging, from developments to induction processes (Williams and Hicks, 2009) to theoretical frameworks to help design our approaches and practices from learning perspectives (Demetriou, 2009).

In this edition of Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning we share with you some of the best papers presented at the conference.

### **Changes to administrative management of the journal**

As of 1st February 2010, administrative management of the journal will transfer from Staffordshire University to the Open University. From this date, subscriptions, article submissions and publication will all be handled by the Open University. Therefore, this issue of the journal will be the last to be produced by Staffordshire University.

The Editors, Staffordshire University and the Open University are very excited about the new possibilities and directions for the journal for 2010 and beyond and would like to thank readers for their continued support.

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